Niagara Escarpment Commission Strategic Plan 2012-2016

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Niagara Escarpment Commission
An agency of the Government of Ontario

foreword

For nearly 40 years, the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) has taken the lead on actively implementing the principles of sustainable land use planning and natural resource management for the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area.

The NEC enters this next chapter with renewed energy and a strong sense of pride in the Commission's role in contributing to Ontario's health, economic development and environmental sustainability.

The NEC was born out of public concern in the 1960s for the preservation of the Niagara Escarpment and recognition of its spectacular landscapes, interconnected ecosystems and vital natural resources. In 1973, the Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act established a planning process to ensure that the area would be protected. From this emerged the Niagara Escarpment Plan (1985, revised in 1994 and in 2005), which was Canada's first large-scale environmental land use plan and set the stage for subsequent environmental land use plans, including the Greenbelt Plan (2005) and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan (2002).

This public concern and passion for the Escarpment continues today, with the NEC leading efforts on behalf of the people of Ontario to preserve the Niagara Escarpment substantially as a continuous natural environment, so that today's and future generations can enjoy the ecological, recreational, social, cultural and economic benefits the Niagara Escarpment provides.

Principles of sustainable land use planning and the preservation of core natural areas are underscored by the Niagara Escarpment's World Biosphere Reserve designation, granted by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1990. The Biosphere Reserve designation recognizes the Niagara Escarpment's unique landscape, ecology, as well as having a provincial land use plan in place and its governance to preserve core natural areas, while balancing development, industrial and agricultural uses in "areas of cooperation."

A prominent and special geological feature of Ontario, the 450-million-year-old forested ridge of fossil-rich dolostone known as the Niagara Escarpment is truly Ontario's Natural Edge - a symbol of sustainable land use planning, including compatible growth and development, where permitted - and preservation of core areas of natural resources and scenic landscapes. The value of the Niagara Escarpment's vital resources including clean water, healthy green spaces for recreation, and ecosystem habitat for many species, including Species at Risk, is immeasurable.

The Niagara Escarpment Commission and its staff are proud to move forward with this 2012-2016 Strategic Plan to guide our work for the next four years as we approach the scheduled review of the Niagara Escarpment Plan in 2015.

W. Don Scott, Chair
Niagara Escarpment Commission

I. mandated activities

As an agency of the Government of Ontario, the NEC is mandated to coordinate and execute a range of administrative and policy directives outlined in the Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act, 1973, (NEPDA) so that the Purpose and Objectives of the legislation are upheld.

Administering the Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP), the NEC develops, interprets and applies policies to maintain and enhance the vitality of the Escarpment's unique environmental and landscape features. This is achieved through the regular review of the NEP and other related legislation and through the consideration of applications to amend the Plan.

Processing approximately 500 Development Permits annually, the NEC considers each against the land use policies of the NEP, making appropriate decisions, consulting with and supporting partners on planning proposals that may affect the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area, and setting permit conditions based on best practices to implement the policies of the NEP.

The NEC strives to ensure public compliance with the policies of the NEP through site inspection and enforcement of permit conditions. The NEC works proactively with municipalities and partners to monitor potential compliance concerns so that development on the Escarpment is consistent with the NEP.

In keeping with the values expressed in the NEP related to the promotion of the Escarpment's ecosystem health and biodiversity, the NEC administers an ecological monitoring program called the "Ontario's Niagara Escarpment Monitoring Program" to study and report on key indicators of environmental vitality.

As outlined in Section 3 of the NEP, the Plan includes a network of more than 140 protected areas in the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System (NEPOSS). The MNR and the NEC, in partnership with partner agencies, promote land acquisition, the development of management plans, and the promotion of public access to enjoy and explore the protected areas of the NEPOSS.

II. vision

The NEC supports the Purpose and Objectives of the NEPDA and the NEP that remain unchanged and increasingly relevant in Ontario's growing urban environment.

The Purpose of the NEPDA is:

To provide for the maintenance of the Niagara Escarpment and land in its vicinity substantially as a continuous natural environment, and to ensure only such development occurs as is compatible with that natural environment.

The Vision Statement of the NEC is:

Through excellent public service, support the Purpose of the NEPDA by maintaining and enhancing the natural environment and cultural landscape of the Niagara Escarpment for today's and future generations.

III. mission statement

Preserve, Protect and Promote the Niagara Escarpment, and uphold its UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve designation.

IV. guiding principles

The Niagara Escarpment Commission will be guided by the following principles in carrying out its responsibilities.

1. Preservation of the Niagara Escarpment through environmentally sustainable land use planning
2. Leadership in awareness of the value of the Niagara Escarpment
3. Consistent application of policy and legislation
4. Independent and impartial decision-making
5. Transparent, efficient and effective processes and procedures
6. Positive and respectful engagement with clients, partners, and the public
7. Organizational excellence

V. strategic goals and actions to implement them

1. role of the commission

GOAL The Niagara Escarpment Commission is a decision-making authority administering land use policies and issuing Development Permits. The Commission will explore new opportunities to promote the Escarpment program, explain the role of the Commission to partner ministries, governments, students, landowners and residents of the Escarpment and engage the staff, public, clients and partners prior to making decisions. The Commission will embrace opportunities to streamline the agency's decision-making processes and facilitate a full complement of Commission members.

Proposed Actions

1.1 Streamline decision-making by exploring opportunities to use new processes and technology.

1.2 Explore outreach opportunities to foster an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the Commission and the Escarpment Program.

1.3 Establish Sub-committees - involving the Commissioners on special projects.

1.4 Explore opportunities to encourage filling Commission vacancies in a timely way.

1.5 Undertake annual internal reviews to chart the progress of Actions in the Strategic Plan.

2. niagara escarpment plan implementation

GOAL The core business of the Commission is the implementation of the policies of the NEP through the review of applications for Plan Amendments and Development Permits and making appropriate decisions. Together with the interpretation and application of the policies through comments on applications, participation in hearings, monitoring of the natural heritage on the Escarpment and compliance activities, Commission staff will continue to implement the Purpose and Objectives of the Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act.

Proposed Actions

2.1 Initiate Plan Amendments and review Plan Amendment applications, process Development Permit applications, conduct the Ontario's Niagara Escarpment (ONE) monitoring program and other environmental research and identify appropriate resources to achieve this action.

2.2 Strive for timeliness of Commission decisions through review of current activities and staff complements, and set targets for improvement.

2.3 Prioritise other functions given limited resources i.e. Environmental Assessments, participating in committees, commenting on studies.

2.4 Enhance the Compliance function and report on issues relating to achieving compliance including participation in Escarpment community events, engaging members of the public and delivery of education about the importance of compliance with the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

2.5 Enhance the use and support of Geographic Information System (GIS) technology in support of the core program of the NEC.

2.6 Identify and implement process improvements to provide better customer service.

Niagara Escarpment
Plan Review 2015

3. 2015 plan review

GOAL The next review of the NEP is mandated for 2015. The Plan Review is an opportunity to identify and update key areas of the policies and designations needed to protect the Escarpment over the long term. This review should apply new environmental science and best planning practices in policy development in consideration of recent land use planning initiatives, legislation and the public interest. The NEC will identify key policy directions and propose amendments to the NEP to prepare for the upcoming review by the Minister of Natural Resources. The NEC will collaborate with the Ministries of Natural Resources and Municipal Affairs and Housing, and consult with partners and the public to prepare for this opportunity.

Proposed Actions

3.1 Compile possible policy changes by March 1, 2013.

3.2 Consult with MNR, MMAH, other provincial ministries, municipalities and other partners throughout the review process.

3.3 Develop proposed Plan Review components for consideration by the Minister by the end of 2013.

3.4 Assign staff, develop work plan and assess budget and required resources in 2013.

3.5 Continue to conduct research and monitoring analysis throughout 2012 to 2015.

4. biosphere reserve

GOAL In recognition of the designation of the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area as a World Biosphere Reserve, the NEC is committed to promoting the values of UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Programme, including sustainability and community engagement. The NEC will continue to collaborate with partners in the Biosphere Reserve community including the Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association (CBRA), and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, to promote and support the principles of the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve.

Proposed Actions

4.1 Identify opportunities to foster collaboration with the Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association (CBRA) and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

4.2 Work collaboratively with partners to build on local initiatives that support the biosphere reserves and create at least two new projects with partners by the end of 2013.

4.3 Continue branding the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve in all NEC communications materials and outreach initiatives; seek opportunities to strengthen that branding through partnerships.

4.4 Renewing and maintaining the Biosphere Reserve designation from UNESCO by supporting the partners and partnerships that collectively deliver the many shared responsibilities for stewarding the Escarpment Biosphere Reserve designation and set priorities based on the recommendations of the periodic review.

5. environmental monitoring

GOAL The NEC will continue with the development, implementation and promotion of a comprehensive environmental monitoring program in order to assess and regularly report on indicators in order to determine the effectiveness of the NEP in meeting its Purpose and Objectives.

Proposed Actions

5.1 Continue to foster partnerships and enter into agreements to facilitate the collection and sharing of data beneficial to evaluating Plan effectiveness.

5.2 Continue to publish "State of the Escarpment" Reports on selected Monitoring Framework themes and indicators that provide recommendations for future action and policy direction each year.

5.3 Share monitoring data with partners on an ongoing basis and regularly update and revise the monitoring content of the NEC website to publicly disseminate monitoring results.

5.4 Continue to collaborate with the MNR and MMAH for the development of appropriate performance indicators and coordinate efforts leading to the 2015 Plan Review.

6. consultation and partnerships

GOAL The NEC works closely with many partners including municipalities, Ministry partners, conservation authorities, non-government organizations and the community. The NEC will continue to provide support on matters of joint concern, particularly on emerging issues where the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area may be affected. The NEC is committed to increasing communication with partners and will strive to develop and foster new channels for partner engagement and public understanding.

Proposed Actions

6.1 Identify and communicate with key partners, by actively engaging members of the Commission with particular interest or expertise, where appropriate, by end of 2012.

6.2 Report to the Commission twice a year on the consultation and partnerships program and Committee involvement; identify new opportunities for collaboration where appropriate.

7. communications

GOAL The NEC will encourage awareness of the NEP and the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve to the public, partners and clients. The NEC will collaborate and utilise a variety of communications initiatives to engage its partners, the public and clients in creating an informed understanding of the NEP and the NEC program.

Proposed Actions

7.1 Convey the Commission's mandate and expand linkages with MNR communications.

7.2 Use new media resources wherever possible to maximize client and partner engagement in cost-effective ways.

7.3 Undertake a variety of public outreach initiatives in partnership to augment capacity.

7.4 Undertake other activities such as the Leading Edge Conference, speaking engagements, conference displays and commemorative events in accordance with the NEC Communications Plan.

8. niagara escarpment parks and open space system (neposs)

GOAL The promotion of public access and compatible recreation on the Escarpment will continue to be a priority as lands in the vicinity of the Escarpment become increasingly urban. In collaboration with the NEPOSS Council, MNR, conservation authorities, the Bruce Trail Conservancy and other partners, the Commission will support the identification of priority lands for securement to a minimum of 20% of the Plan Area. With these partners, we will continue to encourage additions to the NEPOSS, the review and approval of park management plans and the promotion of NEPOSS parks to ensure that they are appropriately planned to encourage park visitation and natural heritage preservation.

Proposed Actions

8.1 Maintain the NEC advisory role to NEPOSS Council providing input to marketing and communications, promotion of the park system and update the Commission with regular reports.

8.2 Recommend priority lands for securement and incorporation into the NEPOSS and elsewhere with the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area through partner initiatives throughout the life of the Strategic Plan.

8.3 Discuss strategies, in consultation with key partners, for supporting land securement in both NEPOSS and in other parcels and tracts not necessarily related to NEPOSS to increase the number of approved park management plans.

9. employee development

GOAL The foundation of an organization is its people. Providing appropriate training and educational opportunities as well as ensuring the transfer of knowledge between existing staff and new staff are key to ensuring that the NEC's team can thrive and adapt to changing processes and technology. Succession planning, knowledge transfer and training opportunities will be developed and supported.

Proposed Actions

9.1 Promote and support continuous learning/training/accreditation through the preparation of individual learning plans for each employee which accurately support identified core skills and competencies.

9.2 Undertake recruitment, retention and succession planning in a fair and open process reflecting the principles of diversity and inclusion.

9.3 Develop a strategy to promote an increase in work/life balance for staff in their lives and careers.

10. technology

GOAL The NEC will focus on using more information and information technology applications to streamline business processes, data and records management and service delivery to enhance workflow. This focus will require staff engagement and training to utilize new processes to become more efficient.

Proposed Actions

10.1 Explore the application of existing and new technology to streamline and improve the efficiency of the daily operations of the Commission.

10.2 Improve access to NEC data within and external to the organization (where permitted) and the strategy for data acquisition by compiling external data needs and identifying partnership opportunities.

10.3 With specific reference to GIS technology, continue to explore new opportunities for the identification, collection, tabulation and management of land use and spatial databases as well as in the application of geoprocessing analysis related to the NEC's core business.

10.4 Report annually to the Commission about the use, management and implementation of technology.

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Photos:
Cover: Bruce Peninsula shoreline, Linda Pim
Pg. 2: View from Rattlesnake Point, Halton Region, NEC
Pg. 3: Cyprus Lake Beach, Bruce County, NEC
Pg. 4. Crawford Lake Conservation Area, Halton Region, NEC
Pg. 5: Simcoe County farm, NEC
Pg. 6: Niagara Escarpment Plan cover detail, Neil Hester
Pg. 7: Escarpment detail, Hilton Falls Conservation Area, NEC
Pg. 8: Trail sign near Cataract, Peel Region, NEC
Pg. 9: Bruce Trail at Mono Cliffs Provincial Park, NEC
Pg. 10: Ladyslipper orchid at Hilton Falls, Nigel Finney, Conservation Halton